

On the necessity of rationalism

[Philosophy](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the process of considering the various means of justification, a relativistic conception of reality assumes that the truth and hence the validity of a statement may only be assessed in relation to the perspective of the discipline which holds a particular belief. In this sense, truth is dependent upon the internal coherence of beliefs within a system of thought. In his *The Last Word*, Nagel claims that such is not the case. He argues that the truth and hence the validity of statements are dependent upon an unqualified notion of reason.

He claims that the truth of a statement is independent upon any particular perspective. If such is the case, it follows that the truth of any statement is independent from the schema [truth schema] presented by any system of thought. In relation to scientific claims, it thereby follows that the truth of scientific claims ought to be assessed through the unqualified notion of reason as opposed to merely their internal coherence within the scientific conception of reality [scientific framework].

The aforementioned argument is based upon the critique of the intrinsic limits to subjectivist doubt since challenges to the independent validity of reason must themselves assume the independent validity of reason. Any explanation of reason deriving from outside the mind can itself be explained only from inside the mind, as having its own independent validity. In the case of scientific knowledge, he argues that it is mistaken to assume that the scientific discipline has freed itself from the limits of the Cartesian problem through the replacement of judgments about rules of practice from objective judgments.

Nagel argues that if science will continually adhere to a subjectivistic and hence relativistic framework, the discipline will fail to provide an objective account of reality. He claims, "the general aim of such reasoning [scientific reasoning] is to make sense of the world in which we find ourselves and how it appears to us and others" (81). If such is the case, it is necessary to conceive of the conception of the world which is not based upon an a priori conception of reality dependent upon a preconceived and limited conception of the world. According to Nagel, such an account is not provided by science.

The reasons for this lie in the subjectivism of science (Nagel 84). Subjectivism within science [scientific methods] is apparent if one considers that the scientific "demand for order cannot itself be rationally justified nor does it correspond to a self-evident necessity" (Nagel 84). He notes that scientific subjectivism can only end if it adheres to rational means of knowledge acquisition. It is only through the defense of rationalism that an objectivist account of evidence is possible.

Nagel further argues that the appeal of subjectivism arises out of a certain reductionist impulse in modern explanation as this reductionist impulse enables the explanation of things to hinge on their reduction to local and finite terms thereby ensuring subjectivist conclusions. Although this enables the assurance against rationalist explanations that refuse to make reason into something irrational or that conceive of reason as a capacity for grasping the universal and infinite principle, the reductionist explanation is in itself dependent on an irreducibly nonlocal and objective understanding of reason. Nagel argues that doubt about reason presupposes reason's

independent validity hence reason's independent validity cannot be coherently doubted.

He rightly argues that to object to reason on the grounds we cannot strictly explain it in naturalistic terms is to misunderstand the irreducible nature of the concept since reason cannot be so explained without losing its meaning or validity and that, as such, it is justified in a different way, by showing it to be necessary to intelligible thought and action. Science thereby must opt for a rationalistic as opposed to a subjectivistic account of reality for it to maintain its value as a discipline.

The Platonic tripartite definition of propositional and fallibilist knowledge found in the last section of the Theaetetus states that knowledge of P occurs when an epistemic agent S knows that P if and only if (1) P is true, (2) S believes that P, and (3) S is justified in believing that P (90). A well-known opposition to such an account of propositional knowledge questions the sufficiency of the aforementioned conditions.

It is argued that although the aforementioned conditions are necessary in the definition of propositional knowledge such conditions are insufficient due to their failure to ensure S against conditions wherein knowledge of P occurs as a result of mere epistemic luck (Gettier 123). This critique is best known as the Gettier type counter examples towards the tripartite definition of propositional knowledge mentioned above.

A logical problem is posited by the Gettier type counter examples. This logical problem is evident in the lack of successful coordination between the truth of P and the reasons that justify S in holding P. Floridi notes that Gettier

type counter examples arise “ because the truth and the justification of P happen to be not only independent but also opaquely unrelated that they happen to fail to converge or agree on the same propositional content P... without S realizing it” (64). In order to understand this, it is important to lay down the main assumptions of Gettier’s counter argument that seeks to explicate the aforementioned logical problem.

Gettier’s argument against the tripartite account of propositional knowledge, which involves the conception of knowledge as justified true belief arose as a result of the following claim: knowledge [propositional knowledge] does not merely involve justified true belief. Such a claim is based upon the following assumptions. First, there are instances wherein the warrant is not a sufficient condition for a belief in P. This is evident if one considers that instances of belief and knowledge of P are in some respects epistemically different [other than in terms of truth] from belief of P without knowledge of P. Second, there are instances wherein warrant is fallible.

This is due to the insufficiency of truth and justification as warrants for knowledge. The evidence of such, according to Gettier is apparent if one considers that it is possible for P to be false even if S believes that P possesses epistemically significant properties such that whenever a belief possesses such properties and is true the belief may thereby qualify as knowledge. Lastly, there is the closure of knowledge under obvious and known entailments. The last assumption argues that if S is justified in believing P and a deductively valid inference is drawn from P to another belief Q then S is justified in believing Q. This is a result of the entailment of Q from P.

Works Cited

1. Floridi, L. “ On the Logical Unsolvability of the Gettier Problem.”
Synthese 142(2004): 61-79.
2. Gettier, E. “ Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” Analysis 23(1963):
121-23.
3. Plato. Theaetetus. Trans. M. J. Levett. Indiana: Hackett Publishing Co.,
1992.